DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 729 RC 020 518

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TITLE Rationale and Needs for Stabilizing Indigenous Languages.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 14p.; In: Stabilizing Indigenous Languages; see RC 020 517.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alaska Natives; American Indian Education; *American Indian Languages; American Indians; *Bilingual Education; Cultural Maintenance; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Eskimo Aleut Languages; Federal Legislation; Indigenous Populations; *Language Maintenance; *Public Policy; Self Determination
IDENTIFIERS Endangered Languages; *Language Policy

ABSTRACT

Although American Indian and Alaska Native communities have largely won the legal right to maintain their languages and cultures, they lack the "effective right" to do so. The effective right means access to the tools for getting the job done--the knowledge, strategies, and resources necessary to resist destruction of languages and cultures. This rationale and needs statement documents the importance of indigenous languages as an irreplaceable cultural knowledge and as a cornerstone of indigenous community and family values. It reviews past government policies to eradicate indigenous languages and the reversal of those policies with the new federal policy of Indian self-determination over the last quarter century. In the 1990s, support for self-determination and for the maintenance of Native languages and cultures has been demonstrated by the Native American Languages Act of 1990, the work of the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the White House Conference on Indian Education, and the United Nations International Year for the World's Indigenous People. Following a summary of tribal educational and language policies, several courses of action are recommended to assist Native communities in developing the effective right to maintain their languages. These actions focus on fostering innovative community-based strategies, directing research toward analyzing community-based successes, fostering cooperation between communities and organizations, and promoting heightened consciousness of the catastrophic effects of language loss for both language minorities and the mainstream population. Contains 27 references. (SV)

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Rationale and Needs for Stabilizing Indigenous Languages[1]

Jon Reyhner

Despite ongoing challenges and setbacks, the struggle of American Indian and Alaska Native communities for the **legal** right to maintain their languages and cultures has been won for the most part. An extensive body of legislation and litigation continues to fortify tribal rights. Our efforts in the United States are being strengthened internationally by actions of the United Nations aimed at protecting the lands, rights, languages, and cultures of indigenous peoples worldwide.

Most American Indian tribes, however, like many other indigenous peoples of the world, lack what may be termed the **effective** right to save their languages and cultures. The effective right as it is used here means access to the knowledge, strategies, and resources necessary to resist destruction of languages and cultures. Stated more simply, the effective right means access to the tools for getting the job done. The legal right without the effective right is of little value. Effective solutions for reversing the loss of American Indian and Alaska Native languages must be found and implemented soon. Both indecision and ineffective action will not reverse the current rapid loss of surviving indigenous languages.

This rationale and needs statement documents the importance of indigenous languages as an irreplaceable cultural knowledge and as a cornerstone of indigenous community and family values. It gives an overview of past government policies to eradicate indigenous languages and then describes the reversal of those policies with the new policy of Indian self-determination over the last quarter century. Tribal language policies are cited as evidence of the desire of American Indians and Alaska Natives to preserve and renew their languages.

The rationale and needs working group was in agreement with the Roundtable's keynoter Joshua Fishman that efforts to save languages must ultimately deal with the intergenerational transmission of mother-tongues. This is, to a large extent, a family and community issue.

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[1]This paper reflects the input of the Rationale and Needs Group, which met on November 17, 1994, and consisted of Elizabeth Brandt, Arizona State University; Damon Clarke, Northern Arizona University; Willard Gilbert, Northern Arizona University; Juana Jose, Office of Indian Education, Arizona Department of Education; Alvin Kelly, Quechan Nation, Yuma; Paul Platero, Navajo Division of Education; Kathryn Stevens, Director, Office of Indian Education, Arizona Department of Education. Thanks also go to Gary D. McLean and Ed Tennant for their contributions to this document.

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Exclusive focus on education and schools can compound, rather than solve, the problem of language shift. Groups who are succeeding in saving their language have found ways to revitalize and stabilize their speech community. In these cases, schools play a role, but the community is the primary focus of action.

Stabilizing an endangered language touches all aspects of a community from child-rearing practices and intergenerational communication to economic and political development. Helping indigenous Americans develop the effective right to save their languages would likely produce important benefits, not only for the various tribes on the brink of destruction but for all societies. An investment in Indian languages that would be large enough, come fast enough, and be well-enough planned to make a difference would likely prove to be an extremely effective investment in terms of addressing pressing national and international problems.

Language as Irreplaceable Cultural Knowledge

Many of the keys to the psychological, social, and physical survival of humankind may well be held by the smaller speech communities of the world. These keys will be lost as languages and cultures die. Our languages are joint creative productions that each generation adds to. Languages contain generations of wisdom, going back into antiquity. Our languages contain a significant part of the world's knowledge and wisdom. When a language is lost, much of the knowledge that language represents is also gone. Our words, our ways of saying things are different ways of being, thinking, seeing, and acting. In the words of anthropologist Russell Bernard,

> Linguistic diversity . . . is at least the correlate of (though not the cause of) diversity of adaptational ideas — ideas about transferring property (or even the idea of property itself), curing illness, acquiring food, raising children, distributing power, or settling disputes.
>
> By this reasoning, any reduction of language diversity diminishes the adaptational strength of our species because it lowers the pool of knowledge from which we can draw. We know that the reduction of biodiversity today threatens all of us. I think we are conducting an experiment to see what will happen to humanity if we eliminate "cultural species" in the world. This is a reckless experiment. If we don't like the way it turns out, there's no going back. (1992, p. 82)

Where American Indians are concerned, for example, tremendous contributions have been made to the mainstream society in many areas including agriculture, governance, art, and philosophy (Weatherford,

1988 & 1991). If the natural world survives the next few centuries, much will be owed to the insights and perspectives of American Indians and other indigenous groups. Unfortunately, the Indian communities that have survived until now may be extinct by then.

A vicious cycle persists that is very difficult to break. Lack of community infrastructure and many social problems contribute to language shift; language shift fosters dysfunctional behavior, and so it goes. So much damage has been inflicted on the local cultures that some people seem rather fatalistic about language loss, not to mention solving the many social problems associated with the accompanying cultural unraveling.

Family Values and Native Language Survival

American Indian and Alaska Native languages are threatened as fewer and fewer children are learning them in the home. Many non-Indians and some Indians see no tragedy in the loss of these languages, but as this country becomes more and more dominated by concern about crime and the breakdown of traditional families, many American Indians and Alaska Natives see the perpetuation of native languages as vital to their cultural integrity.

The reason for this is, that in addition to speech, each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. Although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are, nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of each person's self-awareness, identity, and interpersonal relationships (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). These values are psychological imperatives that help generate and maintain an individual's level of comfort and self-assurance, and, consequently, success in life. In the normal course of events these values are absorbed along with one's mother tongue in the first years of life. For that reason, cultural values and mother tongue are so closely intertwined in public consciousness that they are often, but mistakenly, seen as inseparable. For the majority of young Natives today, culture and language have, in fact, been separated. As a result, most of these young people are trying "to walk in two worlds" with only one language. This is a far more complex and stressful undertaking than the "two worlds" metaphor would suggest (Henze & Vanett, 1993).

Across two cultures the preferred etiquette for behaving or communicating in a particular situation may be starkly different. Using the same language across the two cultures often poses a challenge to both sense and sensitivity (Platt, 1989). Giving young Natives the opportunity to keep or learn their tribal language offers them a strong antidote to the culture clash many of them are experiencing but cannot verbalize. If along with the language, they learn to recognize the hidden network of cultural values that permeates the language, they will add to the knowledge and skills required to "walk in two worlds." They will

learn to recognize and cope with cross-cultural values that are often at odds with each other, and they will begin to adopt more comfortably the cultural value that is appropriate for a particular cultural situation (Tennant, 1993).

The revival and preservation of minority languages is not a hopeless cause. Successful efforts towards indigenous language renewal and maintenance are to be found around the world. Examples are to be found in the revival of Hebrew in Israel, French in Quebec, and Catalan in Spain (Fishman, 1991). Even in the United States with its emphasis on conformity, small groups such as the Hutterites and Hasidic Jews have been able to maintain their languages and cultures.

Native Language Can Help English Proficiency

In seeking to preserve their cultural heritage, tribes are not rejecting the importance of English language instruction for their children. The results of the latest U.S. Department of Education study of bilingual education programs show that native-language use in schools does not hold children back (Ramirez, 1992). Such research tends to use English-language standardized test scores as a measure of success. If such research also focused on objectives such as strengthening American Indian families, there can be little doubt that bilingual programs utilizing and developing native-language fluency produce superior results. This is supported by the findings in the aforementioned study that parents were most satisfied with having their students learn both English and their home language and wanted their children to stay in bilingual programs longer.

Internationally, researchers have found that bilingualism is an asset rather than a handicap (Baker, 1988; Cummins, 1989). It is not necessary to forget a home language to learn a second "school" language and be academically successful in that second language. It takes time, around six years on average, to become fully — that is academically — competent in a second language, but through proper instruction — such as has been carried out at Rock Point Community School in the Navajo Nation — students can learn English and the academic subjects — math, science, and so forth — and still learn to read and write their tribal language (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1989; Reyhner, 1990).

Former National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) Treasurer Dr. Richard Littlebear sees "our native languages nurturing our spirits and hearts and the English language as sustenance for our bodies" (1990, p. 8). American Indians and Alaska Natives are seeking to follow a bilingual "English Plus" philosophy that will preserve their heritages and will allow their children access to jobs in the non-Indian world.

Results of Past Government Policies

From the very beginning of the invasion of the Americas that began in 1492, Europeans overwhelmingly failed to recognize the strengths of American Indian cultures, globally evaluating them as "savage," when in fact they were different. Europeans commented on but did not fully appreciate American Indian and Alaska Native cultural strengths such as their kindness towards and love of children, the important role women played in many tribes, and their respect for and appreciation of the natural world. Efforts to Europeanize and Christianize Indians alternated with efforts at genocide or removal.

After the American Civil War, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Peace Commissioners in an attempt to bring an end to the Indian wars on the frontier. The commission concluded that language differences led to misunderstandings and that:

> Now, by educating the children of these tribes in the English language these differences would have disappeared, and civilization would have followed at once. . . .
>
> Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated. . . .
>
> In the difference of language to-day lies two-thirds of our trouble. . . . Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted. (*Report of the Indian Peace Commissioners*, 1868, pp. 16-17)

Government supported education became the means to accomplish the eradication of Indian languages. Indian children were taken away from their families and put in government funded boarding schools. Once there, they were kept away from their families for years at a time and punished in a variety of ways if they used their mother-tongue. Harsh punishments such as whipping were used that would never have been considered by the supposedly "savage" Indians. Under Secretary of the Interior Schurz, the Indian Bureau issued regulations in 1880 that "all instruction must be in English" in both mission and government schools under threat of loss of government funding (Prucha, 1973, p. 199). In 1885, the Indian school superintendent for the BIA optimistically predicted,

> if there were a sufficient number of reservation boarding-school-buildings to accommodate all the Indian children of school age, and these building could be filled and kept filled

> with Indian pupils, the Indian problem would be solved within the school age of the Indian child now six years old. (Oberly, 1885, cxiii)

It was felt by J.D.C. Atkins, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1885 to 1888, that "to teach Indian school children their native tongue is practically to exclude English, and to prevent them from acquiring it" (1887, p. xxiii). The ethnocentric attitude prevalent in the late Nineteenth Century is evident in Atkins' 1887 report.

> Every nation is jealous of its own language, and no nation ought to be more so than ours, which approaches nearer than any other nationality to the perfect protection of its people. True Americans all feel that the Constitution, laws, and institutions of the United States, in their adaptation to the wants and requirements of man, are superior to those of any other country, and they should understand that by the spread of the English language will these laws and institutions be more firmly established and widely disseminated. Nothing so surely and perfectly stamps upon an individual a national characteristic as language. . . . [As the Indians] are in an English-speaking country, they must be taught the language which they must use in transacting business with the people of this country. No unity or community of feeling can be established among different peoples unless they are brought to speak the same language, and thus become imbued with like ideas of duty. . . .
>
> The instruction of the Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization, and no school will be permitted on the reservation in which the English language is not exclusively taught. (Atkins, 1887, pp. xxi-xxiii)

- This government sponsored suppression of Indian languages and cultures continues to this day, though without the harsher forms of punishment, in government supported boarding schools that concentrate on an English-language curriculum. An unintended side effect of the government boarding school has been generations of Indian youth that failed to learn loving child rearing skills because of their removal from their homes.

  Coincident with the loss of language has been the breakdown of extended families. In traditional American Indian and Alaska Native cultures, the extended family was a central way of life. Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were all in the household living as a family. Beyond the debilitating effects of the white man's education and

the boarding school experience has been the destructive effects of other government programs such as the construction of single family housing units that isolate extended family members from each other and help prevent grandparents and other relatives passing down their language and culture to the children.

Generally, the results of government sponsored suppression of indigenous languages and cultures in the United States has been catastrophic for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. Prior to the turn of the century this suppression was coupled with genocidal activities such as forced removal, now called "ethnic cleansing," which helped sharply reduced the American Indian population in the United States from an estimated ten million in 1492 to just over two hundred thousand in 1900. Russell Thornton (1987) described this drop in population as the "American Indian holocaust."

Self-Determination

President Richard Nixon enunciated the current United States policy of American Indian and Alaska Native self-determination in response to the expressed desires of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. In a special message to Congress on Indian affairs in 1971, he wrote:

> the story of the Indian in America is something more than the record of the white man's frequent aggression, broken agreements, intermittent remorse and prolonged failure. It is a record also of endurance, of survival, of adaptation and creativity in the face of overwhelming obstacles. It is a record of enormous contributions to this country — to its art and culture, to its strength and spirit, to its sense of history and its sense of purpose.
>
> It is long past time that the Indian policies of the Federal government began to recognize and build upon the capacities and insights of the Indian people. Both as a matter of justice and as a matter of enlightened social policy, we must begin to act on the basis of what the Indians themselves have long been telling us. The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions. (Nixon, p. 565)

This policy was operationalized in regard to education with the passage of the Indian Education Act in 1972 and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975. In the face of subsequent changes in administration, budget cuts, and doubts about the place of minorities in the United States, this policy of self-determination has survived and led to American Indians and Alaska Natives reasserting

their right to control the education of their children and maintain their languages and cultures.

Native American Languages Act

The Congress of the United States in the Native American Languages Act of 1990 confirmed these aspirations by recognizing that the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages. It accorded special status to Native Americans in the United States, a status that recognizes distinct cultural and political rights, including the right to continue separate identities.

Congress found the traditional languages of Native Americans to be an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. Furthermore Congress found convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity are clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child. Languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences and are critical to the survival of cultural and political integrity of any people.

Congress thus declared it is the policy of the United States to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages. Congress encouraged and supported the use of Native American languages as a medium of instruction in order to encourage and support Native American language survival, educational opportunity, increased student success and performance, increased student awareness and knowledge of their culture and history, and encouraged State and local education programs to work with Native American parents, educators, Indian tribes, and other Native American governing bodies in the implementation of programs to put this policy into effect.[1]

INAR Task Force & White House Conference

In 1990 the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education, using former President George Bush's six National Education Goals as a starting point, established a set of ten educational goals to guide the improvement of all federal, tribal, private, and public schools that serve American Indians and Alaska Natives and their communities. Goal 2 reads "By the year 2000 all schools will offer Native students the opportunity to maintain and

[1]The text of the Native American Languages Act can be found starting on page 69.

develop their tribal languages and will create a multicultural environment that enhances the many cultures represented in the school." The Task Force's co-chairs wrote:

> The Task Force believes that a well-educated American Indian and Alaska Native citizenry and a renewal of the language and culture base of the American Native community will strengthen self-determination and economic well-being and will allow the Native community to contribute to building a stronger nation — an America that can compete with other nations and contribute to the world's economies and cultures. (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991, p. iv)

They identified as one of the reasons that Indian Nations are at risk the fact that "schools have discouraged the use of Native languages . . . [with the result that] the language and culture base of the American Native are rapidly eroding." The Task Force found, "schools that respect and support a student's language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students" (p. 16) and recommended "establishing the promotion of students' tribal language and culture as a responsibility of the school" (p. 22).

Following up the work of the Task Force, the first-ever White House Conference on Indian Education was held in Washington, D.C. in 1992. Building on the work of state preconferences, the White House Conference delegates adopted 113 resolutions covering a variety of topics. Under Topic 7, Native Languages and Culture, the Conference called on "the President of the United States and the U.S. Congress to strengthen and increase support for the language and culture of American Indians and Alaskan Natives" through a number of actions including ensuring "the strengthening, preservation, and revival of native languages and cultures [and] to permit students to learn their tribal language as a first or second language" (Summary of Resolutions, 1992).

International Year for the World's Indigenous People

The concerns of American Indians and Alaska Natives are not unique, but rather concerns of indigenous peoples worldwide. In recognition of this fact, the United Nations has recognized both the predicament and aspirations of indigenous minorities by declaring 1993 the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. The 1993 UN Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms their right to self-determination and "the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs," including their languages. The current policy of Indian Self-Determination in the United States, while not perfect, approaches the ideal of freedom and cultural democracy

envisioned in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The renewal of traditional Native cultures in and out of school is re-establishing a sense of community and is fighting the materialistic, hedonistic, and individualistic forces of the popular culture. American Indian concerns about land, culture, and community are concerns that all Americans need to share if we are to assure a future for our children.

The work of the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force and the White House Conference on Indian Education shows the results of Indian people expressing to the U.S. government their vision of how their children should be educated while the work of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations shows the international scope of this vision. They want both educational excellence and preservation of their languages and cultures.

Tribal Language Policies

Non-Indian Americans need to respect and support American Indian and Alaska Native peoples' rejection of the old assimilationist approach to Indian education. This rejection can be found in the educational policies of various tribes, including Navajo, Northern Ute, and Pasqua Yaqui policies passed in 1984. Then Tribal Chairman Peterson Zah declared in the preface to the Navajo tribal education policies,

> We believe that an excellent education can produce achievement in the basic academic skills and skills required by modern technology and still educate young Navajo citizens in their language, history, government and culture. (Navajo Division of Education, 1984, p. vii)

These policies call for local control, parental involvement, and Navajo language instruction. They state,

> The Navajo language is an essential element of the life, culture and identity of the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation recognizes the importance of preserving and perpetuating that language to the survival of the Nation. Instruction in the Navajo language shall be made available for all grade levels in all schools serving the Navajo Nation. (Navajo Division of Education, 1984, p. 9)

Anita Pfeiffer and Wayne Holm of the Navajo Nation's Education Division declared in 1994, "that our work with the language has not been work just on language in isolation. It has been part of a far larger effort to restore personal and societal wellness" (p. 35). Language wellness is a measure of tribal societal wellness. Without access to

their mother-tongue, Native children are cut off from their elders and the traditional community and family values that are their rightful heritage.

The Northern Ute Tribal Business Committee passed resolution 84-96 in 1984 declaring,

> the Ute language is a living and vital language that has the ability to match any other in the world for expressiveness and beauty. Our language is capable of lexical expansion into modern conceptual fields such as the field of politics, economics, mathematics and science.
>
> Be it known that the Ute language shall be recognized as our first language, and the English language will be recognized as our second language. We assert that our students are fully capable of developing fluency in our mother tongue and the foreign English language and we further assert that a higher level of Ute mastery results in higher levels of English skills. (Northern Ute, 1985, p. 16)

The resolution also requires Ute language instruction in preschool through twelfth grade.

The language policy passed by the Pascua Yaqui Tribal Council holds that "Our ancient language is the foundation of our cultural and spiritual heritage" and declares that "all aspects of the educational process shall reflect the beauty of our Yaqui language, culture and values" (Pascua, 1984, p. 1).

Conclusion

This rationale and needs statement in no way completely describes the needs and concerns of all nations and peoples whose languages are endangered. It is a collective work done by representatives of several nations, educators, and others involved in American Indian and Alaska Native education. We apologize to you if your concerns are not voiced in this document, but offer that this will be an ongoing process and we would appreciate your comments and advice.

Several courses of action could greatly assist American Indian communities in developing the effective right to maintain their languages. Such actions include: 1) fostering of new, innovative, community-based approaches to strengthen and stabilize threatened languages; 2) directing more research efforts toward analyzing community-based successes in resisting loss of Native American languages and other minority languages as well; 3) fostering communication and partnerships between communities and organizations trying new approaches to maintaining languages; and 4) promotion of heightened consciousness of the catastrophic effects of language loss, both among members of language minority populations

and among members of the mainstream population. Unfortunately, the human and financial resources needed to stabilize or restore American Indian languages extend beyond the resources of nearly all Indian communities. Because of the federal and state governments' long-term role in creating the present endangered status of American Indian and Alaska Native languages, it is appropriate for them to provide assistance in helping American Indians and Alaska Natives to stabilize and renew their languages.

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